

# Pass the Peas Please

Buying locally grown produce for use in state park restaurants makes just about everyone happy.

By Leslie Teach Robbins



Visitors at the Greenbo Lake State Resort in Kentucky get more than pizza, hot-dogs and nachos when they visit the dining room in the Jesse Stuart Lodge. Instead, they find just-picked tomatoes on the salad bar and pies made fresh with homegrown berries.

All the produce on their plates was delivered by a lucky local farmer who's a member of the Kentucky Proud program. He's been teamed with the restaurant's chef who plans menus around the fruits and vegetables to be harvested that week. The farmer is lucky because there's no middle man. His produce sells for better prices than he could get selling to a cooperative or a distributor. Only a

year ago, the state parks chefs would have ordered their produce from a wholesaler.

Kentucky has 17 resort-style parks (more than any other state) with lodges, cabins and dining rooms run by state employees. In other states, food service is usually contracted out to large corporate management companies like Aramark or Sodexo.

Bob Perry, director of food service for Kentucky State Parks, couldn't be more perfect for the job. He's a chef and a gardener and he lives on his wife's family farm. As chef, Perry is dedicated to using the freshest and highest quality produce available. As gardener, he saw immediately that there was a market open for family farms. "We are estimating that we'll spend over \$500,000 on produce for parks in 2005," he says, "and

## DIRECT MARKETING PROGRAMS HAVE CATCHY NAMES

Alaska Grown  
Arizona Grown  
Buy California  
Colorado Proud  
Connecticut Grown  
Fresh From Florida  
Georgia Grown  
Georgia, Always in Good Taste  
Idaho Preferred  
Illinois Product  
Kentucky Proud  
"Get Real Maine"  
Maryland's Best  
Massachusetts grown....and fresher!  
Minnesota Grown  
Make Mine Mississippi  
AgriMissouri  
Montana's Choice  
New Hampshire's Own  
Jersey Fresh  
New Mexico Taste the Tradition/  
Grown with Tradition  
Pride of New York  
Goodness Grows in North Carolina  
Ohio Proud  
PA Preferred  
Rhode Island Grown: Take Some Home  
South Carolina Quality  
Pick Tennessee Products  
Go Texan  
Utah's Own  
Vermont Seal of Quality  
Virginia Grown  
"From the Heart of Washington"  
West Virginia Grown  
Something Special from Wisconsin

that money should go back to local farmers."

The Department of State Parks works with the State Department of Agriculture's direct marketing program, "Kentucky Proud," bringing a lucrative new market to local produce growers. The move was possible because the legislature in 2002 amended the state's procurement code to allow state agencies to support local agriculture. It exempted agricultural products from the competitive bidding process. As a result, the state park restaurants and three cafeterias in state government buildings in Frankfort purchase produce directly from local farmers.

Each week, prices are established by averaging the prices at several different wholesale companies. The parks continue to pay a wholesale price that keeps them within their

Leslie Teach Robbins covers environmental health for NCSL.

## KENTUCKY'S NOT ALONE

The concept of “buy local” campaigns has been around for decades. A number of states have created direct marketing assistance programs within their state department of agriculture to help small- and medium-family farmers stay in business.

The Pride of New York program offers marketing materials and assistance to food producers. It also runs promotions that highlight state grown produce. The Heart of Washington program started in 2001 with assistance from a federal grant. It not only markets state grown fruit and vegetables, but also highlights the state's livestock, processed foods, wine, nursery products and seafood. These programs provide farmers a cost-efficient marketing tool by spreading out the costs over a large group of growers who participate in the program.

budget, but the local farmer gets a higher price than he would elsewhere.

Park chefs use a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. In a typical month, a dining room might serve 30 or more different kinds of produce including lettuce, tomatoes, melons, berries, peppers, green beans, corn, cabbage, pumpkins and squash.

“When it's fresh, our guests are happy,” says Cary Lyle, a resort manager. Diners aren't just those staying at the resort, they come from the local community as well. “It's all because they know the food is fresh from local farms,” he says.

### GOOD FOR THE FARMER

The departments of parks and agriculture are estimating this program has the potential to bring in about \$2 million in sales for Kentucky fruit and vegetable producers.

Rusty Monahon, a part-time farmer in Germantown, Ky., has started to market his berries to two state parks. “I have a couple more lined up,” he says. “This whole program gives me a good outlet and good price.”

Monahon says farming is a sideline for him, but he's already planning to expand. “The demand is better than what I thought it would be.”

### NOT JUST PARKS

It's not just the park kitchens that are involved in Kentucky Proud. The agriculture department, which gets funding from the tobacco settlement for the program, has searched out all kinds of new markets and opportunities for farmers. It is promoting a wide variety of products, from goats and aquaculture to beef, produce and specialty foods.

More than 20 family farms supply the food on the menu for the Kentucky Derby. Matching ad dollars go into high-visibility promotions linked to major retailers like Kroger and Wal-Mart and popular family-run supermarkets in the state.

“Owning a small family farm is increasingly a challenge,” says Representative Tom McKee, chairman of the House Agriculture and Small Business Committee. “This program provides benefits to the farmer, the consumer and the community. Local produce doesn't have to be transported great distances. Consumers get better-tasting fruits and vegetables. We eliminate or reduce fuel, packaging and refrigeration costs,” he says. ■■■



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